

Exhibit J

Embattled FBI agent meets with Congress behind closed doors in 11-hour marathon

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(CNN) — Embattled FBI agent Peter Strzok told lawmakers Wednesday in a marathon, closed-door interview that the anti-Trump text messages he exchanged with an FBI lawyer were part of an "intimate" conversation and he did not intend to act on any of the missives, according to Democrats in the meeting.

But Republicans argued that Strzok's claims about the messages after the fact were simply not credible, and one lawmaker claimed to have learned new information from his interview Tuesday with the House Oversight and Judiciary Committees.

Strzok's interview -- which stretched more than 11 hours and included unclassified and classified sessions -- was just the latest instance where Republicans and Democrats came away with dueling assessments over the FBI's actions during the 2016 election.

Wednesday's interview was the first chance for Congress to grill the FBI agent at the center of the controversy over the FBI's handling of its investigations into Hillary Clinton and Russia.

Strzok has been lambasted by Republicans — and criticized by some Democrats, too — for his anti-Trump text messages exchanged with former FBI lawyer Lisa Page. Strzok and Page, who had an extramarital affair, sent thousands of text messages while they worked on the Clinton email investigation, the Trump-Russia probe and briefly on special counsel Robert Mueller's team. Strzok was removed from Mueller's team after the texts were discovered; Page had already left.

Four sources from both parties tell CNN that Strzok told the House panels that Mueller didn't press him about the texts when they came to light.

In the closed door interview, Strzok was asked how Mueller reacted to the revelation of his anti-Trump texts. He said Mueller did not press him on the texts or ask him whether that showed any bias in the probe. But Mueller immediately removed him from the probe, according to the sources.

Republicans are likely to argue that it shows Mueller didn't care that the FBI probe may have been impacted by a biased agent. But Democrats say Mueller simply acted promptly as soon as he learned of the texts to remove Strzok from his team.

Democrats said that Strzok explained to lawmakers that his messages he exchanged with Page were "intimate" and "private," intended only for her and not a broader audience.

"He said the context was there were private emails, and these were certainly not any intent to act on anything," said Rep. Jerry Nadler of New York, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee. "They were private expressions of opinion to a woman he was having an affair with."

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, an Illinois Democrat, described Wednesday's interview as a "feisty, tense exchange" at various points.

"I don't walk away with the impression that politics bias actually controlled the actions of FBI agents," Krishnamoorthi said.

Republicans argued that Strzok shouldn't be taken at face value.

"Of course, he's always said that," Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, a leader of the House Freedom Caucus, said of Strzok's explanation.

But Rep. Mark Meadows, the North Carolina Republican who leads the conservative House Freedom Caucus, disputed Strzok's account, rejecting his explanation that the "we'll stop" Trump text was just an "intimate exchange between intimate friends."

"I would expect any witness to suggest they've looked at this impartially. ... I don't know how any reasonable person reads the texts and concludes there was not bias," Meadows said. "If you have an intimate personal conversation between two people — that normally would show the intent."

Meadows also said he learned new information, but he would not disclose what that was.

He suggested the information was related to the Trump-Russia investigation and Mueller's probe, which were not part of the inspector general report that was released earlier this month.

"The whole handoff between the FBI's investigation and the special counsel's investigation obviously has some concerns if you're relying predominantly on Peter Strzok," Meadows said.

Strzok was faulted [in the recent inspector general report from the Justice Department](#) for his anti-Trump bias, with Inspector General Michael Horowitz concluding that his texts "cast a cloud" over the entire FBI investigation. The report also found no evidence that the political bias affected the specific investigative decisions that were reviewed in the Clinton case, but found fault with Strzok for prioritizing the Russia investigation over the Clinton email probe.

But the latest batch of text messages uncovered by the inspector general included one in which Strzok told Page "we'll stop" Trump -- and Trump and his conservative allies say the texts show that the FBI was biased against Trump, arguing that the Mueller investigation is tainted as a result, too.

"It's one thing to say 'Trump's awful.' It's another thing to say 'We're going to stop him,' especially when those statements are made within 15 days, just days after you've launched an investigation into that individual," Jordan said in advance of the hearing.

The inspector general also said he could not conclude that political bias prompted Strzok to prioritize the Russia investigation over going through the emails on Anthony Weiner's laptop. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, a Texas Democrat, said Strzok said that "he did not elevate one investigation over the other."

After an FBI career spanning more than two decades and an ascent to the No. 2 spot within the counterintelligence division at the FBI, Strzok's collapse in the court of public opinion has been swift.

The man who led top secret Chinese espionage investigations was [led out of the FBI building earlier this month](#) as the bureau continues its disciplinary proceedings into the conduct revealed in Horowitz's report.

Strzok has indicated that he wants to testify and tell his side of the story now that the inspector general report has been released.

Indeed, Strzok told Justice Department investigators that despite his private messages, had he actually wanted to prevent Trump from being elected, he would not have maintained confidentiality about the investigation into contacts between the Trump campaign and Russians in the months before the election.

"Pete is central to this story. We should let the American people see who he really is," Strzok attorney Aitan Goelman said last week. "Pete has steadfastly played by the rules and respected the process, and yet he continues to be the target of unfounded personal attacks, political games and inappropriate information leaks."

While House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte initially issued a subpoena for his testimony last week, Strzok appeared voluntarily for an interview Wednesday.

According to his legal team, he "proactively" contacted the committee "when he read press reports that it was interested in his testimony."

Numerous congressional committees have expressed an interest in speaking to Strzok, but Wednesday's hearing will be the first before a congressional panel. The hearing is behind closed doors despite the wishes for a public hearing from several conservatives on the House panels -- as well as Trump himself.

"The hearing of Peter Strzok and the other hating frauds at the FBI & DOJ should be shown to the public on live television, not a closed door hearing that nobody will see," Trump tweeted on Monday. "We should expose these people for what they are - there should be total transparency!"

Conservatives on the two committees [have also been unhappy with the pace of the investigation](#) into the FBI's actions, including that Strzok is only being interviewed eight months into the probe and Page has yet to be scheduled.

Several Republicans said on their way into the interview repeated that they wanted him back for a public hearing. This included Goodlatte, who said he will be in "soon" for a public hearing, suggesting it could occur before August.

Democrats also said they supported a public hearing.

"There seems to be a difference of opinion in regards to what those text messages actually meant, and I personally think he should be heard in a public forum, this should not be a closed process — he should have a chance to tell the public what he meant in those messages," Krishnamoorthi said.

This story has been updated with additional developments.

CNN's Maeve O'Brien and Dan Scully contributed to this report.